

Numbers 3:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Because all the firstborn are mine; for on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto me all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast: mine shall they be: I am the LORD.

Analysis

God commands Moses to consecrate (Hebrew 'qadash', קָדַשׁ, 'to set apart as holy') the Levites as substitutes for Israel's firstborn sons. The theological foundation is stated: 'all the firstborn are mine'—God's claim on Israel's firstborn stems from the Passover deliverance when He spared Israel's firstborn while judging Egypt's. The Levites' consecration fulfilled God's righteous claim without requiring every firstborn son to serve in the tabernacle, which would have disrupted tribal life and inheritance patterns. This substitutionary principle—one tribe serving in place of individuals from all tribes—foreshadows Christ's substitutionary atonement where One dies for many. The Levites' service involved maintaining, transporting, and guarding the tabernacle, enabling the rest of Israel to worship without constant ceremonial obligations. This division of labor allowed each tribe to focus on their assigned tasks while the Levites facilitated corporate worship. The principle that God's claim requires satisfaction either directly or through an acceptable substitute runs throughout Scripture, finding ultimate fulfillment in Christ who satisfies God's justice on behalf of all believers.

Historical Context

The consecration of the Levites occurred during Israel's second year after the Exodus, following the tabernacle's completion. The Passover event (Exodus 11-12)

established God's claim on Israel's firstborn—when He passed over Israelite homes marked with lamb's blood while striking down Egypt's firstborn, He established a redemptive claim. The Levites were chosen partly because of their loyalty to God during the golden calf incident when they rallied to Moses and executed judgment on the idolaters (Exodus 32:25-29). The census in Numbers 3:39-43 showed 22,273 firstborn Israelite males but only 22,000 Levites, requiring the additional 273 to be redeemed with five shekels each (Numbers 3:44-51). This substitution system functioned throughout Israel's history until the temple period, when Levites and priests maintained their distinct tribal identity and roles.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does the Levitical substitution for Israel's firstborn illustrate the principle of substitutionary atonement fulfilled in Christ?
2. What does God's claim on the firstborn teach about His rightful ownership of all we have and are?

Interlinear Text

כִּי	לִי	כָּל	בְּכוֹר	בְּיוֹם	הַכֹּתִי
H3588	H0	H3605	Because all the firstborn	are mine for on the day	that I smote
			H1060	H3117	H5221
כָּל	בְּכוֹר	בְּאֶרֶץ	מִצְרַיִם	הַקֹּדֶשׁ שְׁתִּי	לִי
H3605	Because all the firstborn	in the land	of Egypt	I hallowed	H0
	H1060	H776	H4714	H6942	H3605
בְּכוֹר	בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל	מֵאָדָם	עַד	בְּהֵמָה	וְלִי
Because all the firstborn	in Israel	both man	H5704	and beast	H0
H1060	H3478	H120		H929	H1961
אֲנִי	יְהוָה:				
H589	mine shall they be I am the LORD				
	H3068				

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 13:12 (References Lord): That thou shalt set apart unto the LORD all that openeth the matrix, and every firstling that cometh of a beast which thou hast; the males shall be the LORD'S.

Luke 2:23 (References Lord): (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;)

Exodus 13:2 (References Israel): Sanctify unto me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is mine.

Exodus 13:15 (References Lord): And it came to pass, when Pharaoh would hardly let us go, that the LORD slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of beast: therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all that openeth the matrix, being males; but all the firstborn of my children I redeem.

Leviticus 27:26 (References Lord): Only the firstling of the beasts, which should be the LORD'S firstling, no man shall sanctify it; whether it be ox, or sheep: it is the LORD'S.

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